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ABSTRACT

This brochure provides information for parents on selecting a good early childhood program for their preschool-age child. The brochure describes how 3- and 4-year-olds learn, and gives examples of how a developmentally appropriate program approaches intellectual, social, motor, and language development in 3- and 4-year-olds. The brochure also describes how an integrated curriculum uses themes or projects to enable children to expand their knowledge and skills in language and literacy, mathematics and science, social studies, and the arts. In addition, the brochure contrasts developmentally appropriate and inappropriate educational practices for preschoolers. A list of further readings and resources available through the National Association for the Education of Young Children concludes the brochure. (KB)

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A Good Preschool for Your Child

ED 425 840

Marilyn Smith

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Imagine your child is an explorer, about to visit an uncharted land. He has been inoculated against rare diseases, and his luggage is stuffed with foreign language dictionaries, clothing for all kinds of climates, nutritious snacks, and some well-loved memories of home. He is as prepared as possible for whatever he may encounter in his travels.

In a very real sense, your child *is* an explorer. The future he faces is unknown territory. And you, the parent, are doing everything you can to get him ready for his great adventure.

Many of the skills our children will need in the years to come we can only guess at. (A generation ago, who ever thought that 3- and 4-year-olds would use computers?) But we can be sure of some things. Those who succeed will have the flexibility of mind to find solutions where others see only problems. They will be curious about how things work. Becoming tolerant of differences, they will be able to get along with and work well with others. And, like the explorers they are, they will continue to learn and adapt as their world continues to change. As crucial as it is for your child to master life skills for the future, his present life is important, too.

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HOW YOUR 3- TO 4-YEAR-OLD LEARNS

Three- and 4-year-olds in a given early childhood program will, of course, follow their own individual developmental patterns, which may vary greatly from child to child. Nevertheless, all 3- to 4-year-olds learn best when

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. . . they feel safe and secure in their environment. A child should feel that her teachers like having her around and that she is important to them and to the other children in her early childhood program. Children also should not feel pressured to do things they find physically or emotionally too difficult. For instance, a 3- or 4-year-old shouldn't be expected to sit still and listen to an adult talking for long periods of time.

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. . . they learn what is meaningful to them. Learners of any age—and especially young children—understand and remember new things that relate to the experiences, knowledge, and skills they already have. A new thread of learning stays with the child when it is part of a fabric, not an isolated strand.

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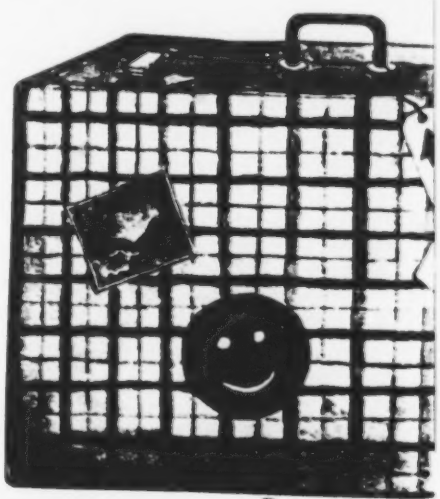
. . . they are given opportunities to learn and develop through exploration and play. Three- and 4-year-olds need materials and equipment that will spark their interest: they thrive when they are able to experiment, test things out for themselves, and draw their own conclusions. For instance, a small child tries out how far marbles roll when she sets a sliding board at different heights; she is learning about inclined planes and experiencing the scientific method.



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Good early childhood programs promote learning and development

Teachers in a quality early childhood program take these basic characteristics of young children into account. In fact, the curriculum, teaching strategies, and environment are all based upon what early childhood educators know about the way children develop and learn. Such programs are said to be "developmentally appropriate." Staff in programs like these consider the strengths, interests, and needs, as well as the cultural background, of each child in the group.

Here's how a developmentally appropriate program approaches important areas of development for 3- to 4-year-olds.

Intellectual development

Because 3- and 4-year-olds are most likely to remember concepts and strategies they learn through hands-on experience, teachers allow ample time for experimentation. Teachers watch closely and take advantage of opportunities to extend the play and challenge the child's thinking and reasoning processes. If a child is playing at the sand table, for instance, the teacher might say, "What would happen if you poured the sand from the big blue cup into the [smaller] yellow one?"

Through sand and water play and constructing with blocks, 3- to 4-year-olds begin to learn the basics of scientific and mathematical concepts—what floats or balances and what doesn't; what happens when you pour sand from a tall, skinny container into a short, fat one.

Teachers promote language and literacy by reading stories aloud, encouraging children to talk about their work, creating a classroom environment rich in different examples and uses of print, and helping the children turn their ideas and artwork into books.

Readily accessible to the children and within their reach is a variety of art materials, such as markers, crayons, paints, and colored papers. Children are encouraged to express their feelings and ideas through these media.

Social development

The teacher actively fosters a sense of community within the classroom or group. For instance, photos of children's families are prominently displayed, different aspects of the children's homes and cultures are brought into the classroom, and children sometimes work on group projects (such as creating a mural for the center). Every child feels like he or she belongs. Children learn that it's important to respect others, despite differences, and to work together as a team.

Aware that 3-year-olds often cannot resolve social conflicts, such as fights over toys, the teacher is on the alert to take action when children are at an impasse. He will talk to the children about what has happened and help them come up with a solution acceptable to all. Most 4-year-olds want to "be friends" with their peers, but they lack the verbal skills and ability to see the other child's point of view. Teachers help them to think through what happened and find the words they need to express their feelings and their suggestions for solving the problem.

Three-year-olds can follow simple directions, and the teacher reinforces this by having them perform such classroom tasks as setting out place mats at the table or cleaning the play area with a sponge and water. Four-year-olds can pour juice and get their own snacks.

Four-year-olds begin to engage in real cooperative play ("I'll be the baker," one child says, "and you come to my store to buy cupcakes"). Teachers provide stimulating opportunities and materials. They also make sure that 3-year-olds, who like sitting next to each other and chatting while they use toys (associative play), have the space to do so.

Large-motor development

Three- and 4-year-olds have trouble sitting still for prolonged periods, so teachers plan for plenty of well-supervised physical activity throughout the day. These activities challenge children, but they also can be adapted to accommodate a wide range of abilities. For instance, a low four-inch-wide balance beam is set up in the play area for 3-year-olds, while 4-year-olds have access to a three-inch beam.

THE INTEGR

Inside the classroom, 3- and 4-year-olds dance to music, exercise ("jump in a circle" as the teacher suggests), and play games that promote coordination (Simon says, "Stand on one foot and touch your nose").

Small-motor development

Since 3- and 4-year-olds in any given classroom vary in their small-motor dexterity, teachers provide a wide range of materials that children at various levels of development can use. At this age, children practice and hone their fine-motor coordination by playing with pegboards, playdough, stringing beads (leaving smaller ones for older kids), blocks, Duplos, and Legos.

Children are encouraged to dress themselves. But if a child becomes frustrated in buttoning her coat, a teacher comes to her aid.

Three- and 4-year-olds are allowed to pour juice from small, manageable containers into their cups and to wipe up any spills.

Language development

Three- and 4-year olds improve their language skills by listening to and speaking with adults. Teachers talk to the group as a whole, of course, but they also make sure to have individual conversations with each child throughout the course of the day.

Children this age frequently talk out loud to themselves while they are playing. ("Don't make the building break," a 4-year-old says as he adds another block to his tower.) Teachers know the value of this private speech and do not discourage it.

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Children learn simple rhymes, songs, and finger plays. They are encouraged to talk about what they are doing during the day and to tell simple stories.

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ATED CURRICULUM

In a good early childhood classroom, teachers do not separate out isolated areas of learning ("First, we will study science and after that math") but rather develop themes or projects through which the children can expand their knowledge and skills in various areas. Children are able to reach a deeper understanding of a subject when they can make connections across several disciplines. For instance, the class visits a farm and learns about animals. Watching a chick hatch out of an egg begins a study of incubation or other science topics. When they record and compare the number of pigs, cows, and horses they see on the farm, they use math. They'll also draw pictures of their trip and tell stories about the animals they saw (language arts). In a developmentally appropriate childhood program, kids ages 3 to 4 will learn the following:

LANGUAGE AND LITERACY SKILLS Adults read to children every day, sometimes one-to-one and other times in a group. Throughout the day, children are talking with adults and with other children. Three- and 4-year-olds begin to experiment with writing, at times making scribbles (for example, under a picture) that they identify as writing. Some 3- and 4-year-olds can write their names or other short words; others are not ready to do so. Teachers plan learning experiences that help children hear distinctions and patterns in language sounds and begin to make some letter-sound connections.

MATHEMATICS AND SCIENCE When children construct with blocks, they learn about measurement (how many small blocks in a line it takes to equal a bigger block) and physics (whether things will balance, for example). They talk about the weather every day and measure and record the changes in the environment. Children learn about levers and gears and other wonders.

SOCIAL STUDIES Children learn about their communities and about local, national, or world events of interest to them, such as the presidential election. Teachers plan experiences that make these events meaningful to children this age. Teachers pay special (but not exclusive) attention to the children's home cultures.

ART, MUSIC, DRAMA, AND DANCE The children have easy access to dress-up clothes and props they need for dramatic play. Daily, there are times for singing songs and listening and moving to music. The classroom is well stocked with crayons and markers (which 3- to 4-year-olds can easily manipulate) as well as paints and paper, and children are encouraged to express themselves through these media.

What you want to see		What you don't want to see
Teachers provide meaningful classroom activities that challenge children to move forward. At the same time, children are able to successfully complete many of the tasks encountered so that they gain self-confidence, feel proud of their accomplishments, and learn to love learning.	or	Teachers give children tasks that they find boring or too easy—such as being asked to glue precut shapes onto pieces of paper. Teachers have expectations that are out of line with the children's developmental capabilities—such as expecting a 3-year-old to write his name legibly.
Teachers plan a curriculum that engages the children. The classroom has been arranged to give children easy access to toys and other materials. Children have the space to interact with their peers and adults.	or	The classroom is disorderly; children wander around, not really becoming involved in activities. The environment is so rigidly structured that children do not feel free to explore materials or interact with others. For instance, all the markers and crayons are put away on a high shelf, and the children must ask to use them.
Teachers maintain a safe, healthy environment and carefully supervise the children.	or	Teachers are inattentive and careless about monitoring the indoor and outdoor safety of the children. Teachers are so nervous about safety that children feel constrained. For instance, children are not allowed to ride tricycles around the playground although it is adequately padded and free of obstacles.
Teachers take adequate safety precautions so that children can take age-appropriate risks. For instance, 3- and 4-year-olds can help bake cookies and, with a grownup's assistance, use pot holders to take the baking sheets out of the oven.	or	Teachers say they are teaching the children to be independent, when in fact they put them in dangerous situations (for instance, they allow a 3-year-old to chop vegetables with a sharp knife). Teachers do things for children that they could do for themselves, such as pour juice or prepare cookie dough, because it is faster and less messy.
Teachers plan a balanced schedule in which children don't feel rushed or fatigued.	or	Teachers let an activity go on too long, so children either become tired out or bored. Teachers jump quickly from one activity to another without sufficient time for transitions, so children become overstimulated and, eventually, exhausted.
Teachers nurture the 3- and 4-year-old's developing language and communication skills by encouraging conversation. They talk to the children, listen to their responses, and they provide opportunities for children to talk with one another.	or	Teachers talk a lot to children, but they speak baby talk or ask questions the children can't possibly answer. Teachers make it clear that they want a quiet classroom, and when children "talk out of turn," teachers get annoyed.
Teachers help children get the most out of every learning situation. They ask the child questions about what she is doing, offer suggestions about other things to do, and add new challenges as the child is ready for them.	or	Teachers think of themselves as supervisors and do not get involved with the children's play. Children may repeat the same tasks over and over without the teachers redirecting them to another activity. Teachers rigidly control all choice time, assigning specific tasks to each child, so children do not have the opportunity to explore new materials and make the mistakes they might learn from.
Teachers set clear limits about acceptable social behavior. At the same time, they know that 3- to 4-year-olds get easily frustrated and are not always able to express their feelings verbally.	or	Teachers spend a lot of time yelling at the children for breaking rules and punishing troublemakers. The teacher doesn't set clear limits. The classroom is chaotic, and there are no consequences for harmful behavior.
Adults read to the children every day—individually, in small groups, and sometimes even as a whole class. Teachers help the children talk about what they have heard and help them relate the stories to activities in the classroom or at home.	or	Teachers read stories only occasionally, and always to the whole group. Children hear stories, but the teachers do not integrate these into the rest of the curriculum; children are not encouraged to talk about or illustrate the stories they have heard.
Teachers make parents part of the community of learners. Parents are welcomed into the classroom, and teachers consult with them about their child's needs and progress.	or	Teachers feel that *they* are the experts, and they discourage parents from offering suggestions or visiting the classroom. Teachers fail to explain classroom situations to parents and give in to parents' demands even when it means going against what they think is best for the children and the group as a whole.

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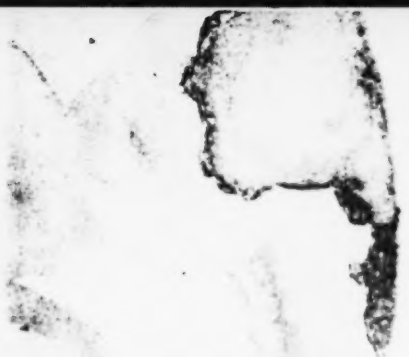

IN YOUR CHILD'S CLASSROOM . . .

FURTHER READINGS/RESOURCES FROM NAEYC

Book

Bredekamp, S., & C. Copple, eds. 1997. *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs, revised edition.* (NAEYC order #234)

Brochures

How to choose a good early childhood program. (NAEYC order #525; in Spanish order #510)

Ready or not: What parents should know about school readiness. (NAEYC order #554)

Understanding the ADA—Americans with Disabilities Act: Information for early childhood programs. (NAEYC order #514)

What are the benefits of high quality early childhood programs? (NAEYC order #540)

NAEYC order #517. © 1997 by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Single copies of this brochure are 50¢ each; 100 copies are $10. Another brochure currently available in this series: *A Good Kindergarten for Your Child* (NAEYC order #524).

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